

# James Weldon Johnson, Poet



*We must begin to tell our young, There's a world waiting for you, Yours is the quest that's just begun.*

*Lift ev'ry voice and sing  
'Til earth and heaven ring  
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty  
Let our rejoicing rise  
High as the list'ning skies  
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea*  
— James Weldon Johnson

In 1900, James Weldon Johnson and his brother John Rosamond sat down to write a song together. They wanted to write a song to celebrate Abraham Lincoln's birthday. The students at Stanton School, where James was the principal, would perform the song. James wrote the lyrics and John wrote the music. The brothers had no idea how famous their song would become. It would soon become the official song for the NAACP. Later, it would be one of the most beloved songs of the Civil Rights Movement. Today, it is often referred to as the Black National Anthem. This song, however, is just a small part of the impact that James Weldon Johnson made on the world.

James Weldon Johnson was born in 1871. As a boy he was taught music and was a strong student at the school where his mother taught. He went on to attend school at Atlanta College and graduated in 1894.

After graduating from college, he returned home to become the principal of Stanton School. This was the same school he had attended as a child. He would be the principal of this school until 1902.

In 1895, while still working as the principal of the school, James decided to start a newspaper. It was called *The Daily American* and it served the Black citizens of Jacksonville, Florida.

James also began to study the law. In 1898, he became the first Black lawyer in the state of Florida.

He opened a law office with his friend, J. Douglas Wetmore.

Even though James was busy running a school, a newspaper, and a law office, he still found time to write poetry and songs. In 1902, James and his brother decided to move to New York City. The brothers would end up writing over 200 songs for Broadway.

While in New York City, James started to become involved in politics. He wrote two songs for Theodore Roosevelt's presidential campaign. After Roosevelt was elected as President, he appointed James as the U.S. Consul in Venezuela. James held this job until 1909, and then was promoted to the U.S. Consul in Nicaragua.

In 1916, James Weldon Johnson joined the NAACP as a field secretary for the organization. The NAACP is an organization that fights racism. He continued to be heavily involved in this organization the rest of his life.

James Weldon Johnson believed that it was important for Blacks to write great literature and create art. He believed that this was a way to show their intellectual equality in the United States. During his life, James wrote and published poetry, novels, and nonfiction.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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1. What evidence in the passage supports the statement below?

**Music was an important part of James Weldon Johnson's Life.**

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2. What evidence in the passage supports the following statement?

**James Weldon Johnson was a hard worker.**

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3. What do you think that James and his brother wanted to write a song for Abraham Lincoln's birthday?

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4. James Weldon Johnson had a number of achievements during his life. Which achievement do you think made the most impact on society? Why?

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